DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 430 331 EC 307 178

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TITLE Gifted Education: A Critical Discussion.
PUB DATE 1999-03-00
NOTE 21p.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academically Gifted; Acceleration (Education); Classroom Techniques; *Curriculum Development; *Delivery Systems; Elementary Secondary Education; Enrichment Activities; Inclusive Schools; Independent Study; *Instructional Design; Mentors; Teaching Methods
IDENTIFIERS Curriculum Compacting; *Differentiated Curriculum (Gifted)

ABSTRACT

In light of recent trends to serve gifted students in regular classrooms, this paper reviews a variety of cost effective options for meeting the needs of gifted students. It notes effects of the inclusion philosophy which encourages education of all students in regular education classrooms, a lack of funds for special programs for gifted students, and the decline in textbook difficulty levels. The following options for accommodating gifted students are discussed: acceleration (early admission, grade-skipping, early graduation, or concurrent enrollment in college); cluster or ability grouping; curriculum compacting (the modification or streamlining of curriculum); enrichment (including both part time pull-out enrichment and in-class enrichment activities); mentoring with an expert in the student's area of interest; and independent study. Research indicates that gifted students make the greatest progress when they are grouped homogeneously and offered a differentiated curriculum. The paper concludes that teachers need to advocate for acceleration or ability grouping and, whether their efforts are successful or not, they need to implement strategies within the classroom to challenge gifted students. (Contains 18 references.) (DB)

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ED 430 331

Gifted Education: A Critical Discussion

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Abstract

Although much of the research indicates that gifted students have higher achievement when they are educated with their academic peers and have a curriculum differentiated to meet their unique needs, these students are increasingly educated in general education classrooms. Many laud this trend, but teachers and parents of gifted students are very concerned. Money and educational philosophy are the two major issues behind this trend. One of the great concerns for gifted educators is that textbooks, hence curriculum, are increasingly more elementary, so the nation's most capable and eager students have little challenge. The classroom teacher plays a pivotal role in this situation, and he or she can do much to improve the educational opportunities for gifted students. Acceleration and cluster grouping, two cost-effective strategies, are not used as extensively as they might be; teachers can advocate for those options for gifted students. Inside the classroom, teachers can implement curriculum compacting, enrichment and independent study to meet the needs of gifted students. Although the situation for gifted children is far from ideal in most schools, their teachers are in a position to advocate for better educational opportunities and also to supply better opportunities.

Today's gifted students are increasingly likely to receive nearly all, if not all, of their education in regular classrooms. Some larger school districts use magnet schools to meet the needs of their brightest students; other districts have magnet classrooms or schools within schools, and some school districts permit grade acceleration for their brightest students. Most districts rely on pullout enrichment programs to meet the educational needs of their gifted students. However, because of scheduling difficulties, finances, small numbers of gifted students, inclusionary philosophies, and charges of "elitism" (Benbow, 1992; Washington, 1997), many districts are either severely curtailing or completely eliminating gifted programs (Willis, 1995). For gifted students without a gifted program, the general education teacher's role becomes increasingly critical. Classroom teachers can advocate for cost effective and "non-elitist" options such as acceleration and ability grouping, and in the classroom they can implement strategies which modify the curriculum to better meet gifted students' needs. Some of these strategies include curriculum compacting, enrichment and independent study.

The two major factors behind this movement are educational philosophy and money (Willis, 1995). The inclusion philosophy encourages the education of all students in regular education classrooms, although proponents recognize that the needs of some individuals with exceptionalities cannot be met in the regular classroom. Many special educators endorse this philosophy, and federal law now mandates that where feasible, children with exceptionalities shall be educated in the general education classroom. Additionally, society encourages fairness and equal education for all students; this often translates into providing the same education to all students regardless of needs (Benbow, 1992). Money is the other major factor: school districts must balance increasing demands and limited resources. Since gifted programs serve small numbers of students they can be eliminated.

Supporters of special education laud this trend, but many advocates for gifted children are concerned about the ability of the general education classroom to meet the needs of gifted students (Willis, 1995).

Even where gifted students have a separate pullout program, most of them still receive the majority of their education in a regular classroom with students of mixed ability and with little or no curriculum differentiation to meet their unique needs. A Classroom Practices Study showed that little instructional or curricular differentiation for bright students was made in regular education classrooms across the country (Archambault et al., 1995), nor do teachers receive the inservice training to adequately meet this need. Increasingly, gifted children do lessons previously learned, or that they learn in much less time than their classmates. When they finish their work, they may receive another repetitive assignment or help slower students. Some lucky ones may be given enrichment opportunities. However, no accommodations are made for most gifted students in heterogeneous classes, and they are condemned to an elementary curriculum that many have already mastered (Westberg, Archambault, Dobyns, and Salvin, 1993).

Textbooks are a major reason behind the lack of challenge: they have become increasingly easy. Reis and Renzulli (1992) cite a 1982 Kirst article which states that the difficulty of textbooks has dropped by two grade levels in the past ten or fifteen years; this may explain why many average students pass skills pre-tests before covering the textbook material. Ideally, textbooks should be slightly higher than the learner's current level of functioning, and Chall and Conard, 1991, (cited in Renzulli, 1994) find that when the match in inappropriate, "learning is less efficient and development may be halted" (p. 45). Unfortunately, most districts buy one textbook that matches the reading ability of less able students; this textbook is often several grade levels lower than the

reading ability of advanced students. This policy deprives advanced students of any challenge and leaves them unprepared for the time when they eventually encounter a rigorous class.

Textbooks are also extremely repetitive. The first half of many textbooks is dedicated to review and reteaching; unfortunately, as Renzulli (1994, p. 45), quoting a 1987 Flanders' study, points out, many classes never make it to the end of the text where the new material is concentrated. Where the text determines the curriculum, the curriculum provides minimal new material, very little challenge and very little interest for the gifted student. Hence, the gifted child, who is most capable of learning and often the most eager, may be exposed to less new and exciting material than his fellow classmates.

The challenge for the effective teacher becomes providing a rich and rewarding education for these talented and gifted children, as well as the twenty to thirty other elementary children or up to one hundred eighty secondary students. In addition to classroom teacher, the teacher with gifted students needs to play two other important roles: advocate and facilitator.

Obviously, no amount of brilliant persuasive advocacy will produce magnet schools, schools within schools or pull out enrichment programs where there is no money, insufficient numbers of gifted students, or districts diametrically opposed to such "elitist" innovations. However, cost effective options for meeting the needs of gifted students do exist, and the effective teacher needs to be knowledgeable about these alternatives and advocate their use for gifted students. Acceleration and cluster or ability grouping need not create any additional costs, nor do they necessarily run counter to the ideas of inclusion and "fairness."

ACCELERATION

Acceleration is an option with little or no financial impact; it is relatively easy to implement and greatly benefits some highly advanced students. It is the program option best supported by research findings spanning sixty years; however, it is infrequently used and often regarded with skepticism (Benbow, 1992). Most schools will see no financial impact unless early admission or graduation reduces state funding for the small number of students involved; either way the loss is negligible. There may be some initial testing costs for students, but the number of students is small, and the cost minimal. It is easy to implement as classrooms, materials and teachers are already in place. Some collaboration may be necessary, but when teachers are willing to work with students, the actual process is similar to losing or adding students, which happens frequently without causing major disruptions.

Acceleration, whether by early admission, grade-skipping, advancing to a higher grade for a specific subject area, early graduation, or concurrent enrollment in college, is very appropriate and highly beneficial for some gifted students. Students who function at a grade level several years beyond their peers or who learn new material exceptionally quickly will become "bored" in a class with their age peers. Bored children may become discipline problems. They also learn that school is easy, and that it requires no effort. They become accustomed to excelling and being the best student in the class without putting forth much effort. This environment discourages achievement; in fact, Benbow (1992) reports a study on gifted students in graduate programs and equally gifted peers who may not be in graduate programs or doing anything with their lives. Those who continue to show high achievement are usually those who had access to an appropriately rigorous academic

curriculum; those who did not have a high school curriculum adapted to their advanced abilities are less likely to be high achievers as adults.

Grade acceleration provides a more challenging curriculum and learning experiences which involve real effort; gifted students need experiences where they have to work hard to achieve. If they never have to work hard, they never learn perseverance (Rimm & Lovance, 1992). In addition, accelerated students move into a peer environment where they may not be the "smartest" all the time. This gives accelerated students the opportunity to experience competition and even an occasional failure. Failure is difficult for many gifted students to accept, and they may not try something difficult because of the possibility of failure. Rimm and Lovance (1992) find when gifted students are accelerated beyond their age peers, failure is easier to accept. After all, they are now competing with older students, and they cannot expect to be first every time. Gifted children need challenge.

> If we don't provide a challenging environment, we are, in a defacto way, teaching our children to underachieve. If for years "being smart" is easy and fast, we can't expect them to cope well with their first challenging experiences when curriculum becomes more complex, nor can we expect them to cope easily with being second or third or tenth in competition if their early years in school provided them only with "being first" experiences. (Rimm and Lovance, 1992, p. 10)

Longitudinal studies indicate that appropriately rigorous curriculum is necessary to sustain and encourage achievement in gifted students (Noble, Robinson and Gunderson, 1992).

Parents and educators have been reluctant to consider acceleration because of possible repercussions in social and emotional growth. In fact, although there are some problems with acceleration, they are mainly administrative, and there is little research to support the concerns

expressed by parents and educators. In fact, studies of accelerated students show that they do not usually suffer either academically or socially, and usually their achievement exceeds that of their age peers in the previous class and also that of their peers in the accelerated class (Southern and Jones, 1992). Rimm and Lovance (1992) argue that social adjustment is not a major factor in making the decision for acceleration, as acceleration does not hamper social adjustment and may even enhance it. Our society does not always prize intellectual expertise in the same ways that it prizes great athletic or artistic talent, and those who are considered intellectual often have a difficult time finding acceptance. When students are accelerated into more appropriate grade levels where they are more like their peers than different from them, they often find a higher degree of acceptance (Benbow, 1992). Accelerated students who have been contacted as adults are overwhelmingly supportive of their acceleration (Noble et al., 1992). While social and emotional factors must be considered, the major factors to consider are educational, and acceleration "seems to enhance the potential of gifted students" (Benbow, 1992, p. 5).

ABILITY GROUPING

A second gifted option that teachers may advocate for is cluster or ability grouping. Where money is the issue, this is an ideal solution, as cluster grouping provides services for gifted students without any additional cost to the district (Gentry, 1996). Where there are insufficient numbers of gifted students to make up an entire class, these gifted students can be grouped together in a regular education classroom with a teacher who is committed to differentiating the curriculum for those gifted students, and this is still an effective learning environment.

Many educators argue that creating separate classes for high-achieving students may be discriminatory, elitist, and even detrimental to the education of other students. They point to

instances when tracking or grouping has resulted in less qualified teachers, less challenging curriculum, and a lesser quality education for students in lower tracks or groups. Some of these practices have discriminated against lower socioeconomic and minority students (Shields, 1996). However, placing gifted students into classrooms without a curriculum adapted to meet their academic needs has detrimental educational and social effects. Kulik (1992) has studied this issue extensively, and he finds that gifted students who are grouped by ability and provided an appropriate curriculum outperform gifted students in heterogeneous classes without any differentiation. Furthermore, Kulik found that students of all abilities benefited from being grouped and receiving a curriculum adapted to their academic level. This finding should make the grouping option more palatable to those who dislike "elitist" practices.

An interesting article by Gentry (1996) reports on a small rural school district which implemented cluster grouping in its intermediate grades. Grouping is flexible and allows for students to move to different groups as their abilities change. At the end of second grade, students are identified as *high achieving, above average, average, low average, low* or *special education*; the identification is based on parent and teacher input as well as achievement test scores. The school has five classrooms per grade level, and each year all the high achieving students are grouped into one classroom along with a mix of average, low average and low students. The other four classrooms have a heterogeneous mix of students, with two of the classrooms containing a cluster of special education students; this allows special education teachers to concentrate on only two classes. Special needs students and high achieving students are with teachers who have a special interest in them as well as more training to meet their needs, and all teachers have a smaller range of academic needs to meet.

Several interesting observations emerge from this study. Not only do the high ability students achieve more than high ability students from a comparable school which does not group, nor offer gifted services, but so do students of all abilities. In addition, each year teachers identify previously unidentified high achieving students. Apparently, gifted students tend to dominate heterogeneous classes, and when they are removed from the class, new academic leaders emerge. Even low and low average students move up the ability ladder. Any school district could implement this program without much significant cost, and students at all levels would benefit.

Given the research on gifted students and learning, it can be argued that gifted students in grade level heterogeneous classrooms without modifications are placed in a restrictive environment. A main premise of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is that all students should learn in the least restrictive environment. For students with disabilities, that is thought to be the general classroom. However, much of the research on gifted students (Kulik, 1992) shows that gifted students in a general classroom do not progress nearly as rapidly as those who are grouped with academic peers. The heterogeneous classroom is detrimental to the gifted student's development. If the principles of IDEA are to be met for gifted students (who are not covered by IDEA, but who still have the same right to the best education possible), then schools must make curriculum adjustments for gifted students. Those adjustments might include acceleration or ability grouping in addition to pull out enrichment programs, honors and accelerated classes.

However, even when schools provide a gifted program, participating students usually have at least some of their classes in heterogeneous classes with a curriculum too basic to meet their needs. Even many above average, but still not gifted, students will not have their academic needs met by the curriculum prescribed for their grade level. The effective teacher will feel the need to

provide greater challenge and growth for these students. Curriculum compacting, enrichment and independent studies are options that can be used to enhance the regular classroom curriculum.

CURRICULUM COMPACTING

Curriculum compacting is the modification or streamlining of the curriculum for those students who have demonstrated mastery of the curriculum content or who clearly have the potential to cover material in a fraction of the time their peers require (Renzulli, 1994). The teacher eliminates previously mastered material, thus increasing the challenge level of the curriculum, and providing time for either enrichment, independent study or acceleration. Rather than repeating lessons they already know which often leads to frustration, boredom, and underachievement (Allenback, 1995), bright students are given the opportunity to focus on activities significant to them.

Curriculum compacting is a relatively easy technique to implement in any curricular area and at any grade level; Reis and Renzulli (1992) call it "organized common sense" (p. 51). A management plan, "The Compactor" (Renzulli, 1994, p. 169), guides the teacher in identifying curriculum yet to be mastered, instructional strategies for mastering that material, the assessment procedure, and acceleration and enrichment activities. The teacher then monitors the students' progress, giving support and instruction where necessary, and allows the student to make many of the decisions (Allenback, 1995). "Once teachers are familiar with the process, they report that it takes no longer than their usual teaching practices (Reis & Renzulli, 1992, p. 51).

During the 1990-1991 academic year, the University of Connecticut, site of The National Research Center on the Gifted and Talented, conducted a study on curriculum compacting (Reis, Burns and Renzulli, 1992). The study found that ninety-five percent of participating teachers were able to identify their high ability students and document their strengths. Eighty percent of teachers

successfully documented curriculum that students had yet to master, listed appropriate instructional strategies, and documented an appropriate mastery standard. Many teachers found that they were able to expand the number of participating students from one or two at the beginning of the year to eight or ten at the end of the year. A majority of the teachers reported that they would compact curriculum again.

In addition to being relatively easy for teachers to implement, students showed clear progress. Approximately forty to fifty percent of traditional classroom material was compacted for selected students in one or more areas in mathematics, language arts, science or social studies. Even when teachers eliminated as much as fifty percent of the regular curriculum, there were no differences in ITBS scores between the treatment group and control groups in math computation, social studies, spelling and reading. Those students with a compacted science curriculum scored significantly higher than the control group; students whose math curriculum was compacted "significantly outperformed" the control group counterparts in the mathematical subscale on the ITBS, and they also had significantly better attitudes and higher preferences for mathematics (Reis et al, 1992). In this study, test scores either remained the same or significantly improved for those students with a compacted curriculum.

Several additional benefits were noted. Teachers found that in addition to the earlier identified gifted students, other high ability students benefited from having their curriculum compacted. Bright, but underachieving, students realized that they could eliminate much of the usual assigned work and "earn time" to work on projects and work that met their interests. Their motivation to complete regular assignments increased. "As one student put it, 'Everyone understands a good deal'!" (Reis & Renzulli, 1992, p. 55).

Curriculum compacting allows gifted students to satisfy the curriculum requirements at an accelerated pace. The time saved allows students to participate in educational activities that enhance their strengths and abilities or perhaps strengthen weaknesses. Many teachers opt for enrichment activities and independent study.

ENRICHMENT

Enrichment is the curriculum option adopted by most school districts to meet the needs of gifted students; usually they are pulled from their regular classrooms for a couple hours per day or one day a week. However, they still require in-class enrichment to optimize their education. Enrichment is the "broadening of the school curriculum to provide increased opportunities within the classroom for pupils to widen their experiences, extend their vision, improve the quality of their school experiences and increase their choices" (Wallace & Pierce, 1992, p. 64).

Enrichment activities may flow from the curriculum; this occurs when the teacher differentiates the curriculum for gifted children or allows them to pursue an interest arising from the curriculum. The teacher may use more higher level cognitive activities for her gifted students than for the rest of the class and may eliminate lower level activities. Perhaps a gifted student is fascinated by a particular aspect of the curriculum, so he studies that area in greater depth and then teaches the class what he has learned. Not only does the gifted student benefit from individual study, so does the rest of the class. A gifted student may complete additional projects in an area of curricular interest. The teacher needs to take care that additional projects broaden students' experience, increase the depth of understanding, and enrich his education, and are not merely more busy work (Renzulli, 1994).

True enrichment activities are student driven (Renzulli, 1994); they arise from the student's interests or are intended to strengthen his weaknesses, build on his strengths, or expose him to new ideas, knowledge and interests. The teacher will want to observe her students closely in order to ascertain their strengths, weaknesses, interests and talents. Sometimes a student provides her with the enrichment idea; his curious questions are a pointer to the direction she may want to take his enrichment activities. Sometimes she will observe his interests and provide activities to ignite his curiosity, and the student will proceed from there. As students mature, many activities may explore current problems or career possibilities, and the students may begin doing independent study. When students are involved in the selection of their enrichment activities, they will gain more from the activity as well as participate more enthusiastically (Renzulli, 1994).

Enrichment activities may take place in the regular classroom, or the student might leave the classroom to work in a resource room, the library, another teacher's room, perhaps even with a mentor, or even in the community. Activities might include, but are certainly not limited to, games, puzzles and activities that strengthen a student's weakness, activities planned to strengthen critical thinking skills, activities which build on the multiple intelligences, science experiments, research, learning centers designed to enrich the curriculum, and computer activities (Renzulli, 1994). Materials might include audio or visual material, software, books, art supplies of all kinds, science supplies and equipment, anything that allows a student to broaden or deepen his base of knowledge. Activities may involve a single individual or a group of individuals. If the student and teacher are fortunate enough to have some outside support, enrichment activities may extend outside the classroom, and the resources are limitless: museums, libraries, businesses, laboratories, nature, or anything which engages the student. Hopefully, the school has a gifted resource person who can

help the teacher with ideas, and the teacher can develop a network of individuals who can expand the opportunities. If the school administration is supportive, teacher and students are limited primarily by themselves.

A new tool which holds exciting promise for enriching and expanding students' curriculum is the internet. Computers in classrooms now provide access to many libraries, organizations, publications and universities. Many gifted students already know how to log on to the internet, and if they do not, another student can teach them; once a student can access the internet, he or she has numerous resources at his or her fingertips. This allows another exciting possibility: distance learning classes which allow "interactive simulations, sound, color, and pizzazz, as well as immediate human feedback, all self-paced to allow the students to progress or review at will" (Washington, 1997, p. 21). College internet classes are commonplace; high schools are increasingly adding courses where no trained personnel are available, and internet classes will undoubtedly reach middle and elementary schools in the near future. Children unchallenged in their classrooms will have access to a more appropriate curriculum. A student who far outpaces classmates in language arts, math, or any subject area has the option of logging on to the internet. This allows that student to study French, English literature or world geography rather than do repetitious worksheets. Administrators and teachers need to be aware of this resource and make it available to their students.

Enrichment opportunities for gifted students restricted to a general education classroom are not frills. Kulik's research (1992) demonstrates that bright students involved in enrichment outperform their unenriched academic peers by several months on grade-equivalent scales. Ideally, enrichment will take place in a separate classroom, but in the real world, classroom teachers may need to provide those opportunities.

MENTORING

While mentoring may not exactly fit the category of enrichment, mentors may be an important part of enrichment activities, and one of the benefits of curriculum compacting is that it may allow time for gifted students to associate with a mentor. Mentoring is the process of pairing older, wiser individuals with younger students. Mentors are often an expert in the field where a student has an interest; however, they might be another teacher, or even an older student. Sometimes mentorships are established formally, and sometimes the student and mentor connect on their own. Teachers of gifted students will hopefully be part of an informal network that may encourage mentoring and provide opportunities to meet experts who will be interested in mentoring. Mentors also provide valuable resources to the teacher of gifted children.

Mentors meet several important needs for gifted students (Shaughnessy and Neely, 1991). Obviously, they are a resource: the mentor has knowledge about the student's area of interest, and he has access to other resources such as people, equipment, laboratories, and libraries. He serves as a role model for the student. He is an expert with whom the student can identify; he is an example of what is necessary for the student to achieve the same kind of expertise, knowledge and skill level as his mentor, and he is in a position to help the student map out his educational and career goals. This may be especially critical for the gifted student who is underachieving. Validation of the student's worth, of his or her giftedness and uniqueness is another significant contribution a mentor can make. Gifted girls have a special need for significant individuals and support systems (Garrison, 1989); often their giftedness is not valued and encouraged, and the mentor is important in this aspect. While mentoring will not meet the needs of all gifted students, it is certainly a worthwhile and usually free option to consider.

INDEPENDENT STUDY

Although independent study can be correctly categorized under enrichment, its significance and popularity demand that more discussion of the subject be given. Independent study is an option that may occur in a class where curriculum compacting takes place or in any class with students whose needs exceed that of the curriculum. Occasionally, an entire class may be devoted to independent study. While independent study may be more difficult to implement in the primary grades, certainly some mature students can handle it in the intermediate grades, and by the time a student is in middle school or high school, teachers can use this method more frequently.

Independent study has some real merits: motivated and self-disciplined students, tired of the traditional educational menu of lecture, worksheets, memorization and testing, can eliminate previously mastered or easily mastered curriculum and take on more relevant work (Strother, 1997). Independent study more closely resembles the real world of work: students are required to research a problem, use their knowledge to produce a report, presentation or some product, and then present their final work. Usually the student works independently without direct supervision and is responsible for meeting necessary deadlines (Strother, 1997). Additionally, students learn by doing rather than memorizing information for a test, and it is more likely that students actually acquire real skills. These skills will be used in college and in real life, and the development of these skills gives students confidence. The process is more authentic.

In conclusion, much of the research on giftedness clearly indicates that gifted students make the greatest progress when they are grouped homogeneously and offered a differentiated curriculum. Unfortunately, financial constraints and the philosophical move toward total inclusion dictates that many of our gifted students will spend most, and sometimes all, of their educational careers in

heterogeneous classrooms. A few will thrive even in this impoverished environment. A small, but still, significant number will drop out of school entirely, and some will become involved with drugs, alcohol, and criminal activity. A small number will commit suicide (although school experiences probably are not the major factor). Many gifted students in an unchallenging environment learn to do only the minimum required to meet class standards. Benbow (1992) asserts that gifted students achieve less than their potential when they are not provided an adequate education. They become average, a terrible loss to both themselves and society. Washington (1997) says it well:

> It is painful to consider that a good portion of America's gifted and talented students spend most of their elementary and middle school careers learning to be average. It is even more painful to admit that they usually succeed. Future generations may look back upon this almost deliberate wasting of intelligence as one of the most grievous crimes of the twentieth century (p. 22).

Effective and caring teachers will recognize the danger to their gifted students of becoming average, and they will act to meet their needs. He or she may advocate for acceleration or ability grouping, either by class or within a class. Whether their efforts at advocacy are successful or not, they will still need to implement strategies within their classroom to challenge gifted students. Those strategies may include curriculum compacting which greatly increases opportunities for enrichment and independent study. The outstanding teacher will push students and the system for excellence.

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